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Abstract: This paper draws upon public sphere theories and the 'mediatization of politics' debate to develop a mapping of the Australian political public sphere, with particular reference to television. It discusses the concept of a 'political public sphere', and the contribution of both non-traditional news media genres, such as satirical television and infotainment formats, to an expanded conception of the political public sphere. It considers these question in the context of two case studies: the Q&A program on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and its uses of social media and interactive formats to engage citizens, and the comedy program Gruen Nation, also on the ABC, which analyzed the use of political advertising to persuade citizens during the 2013 Australian Federal election.

Engaging, Persuading and Entertaining Citizens: Mediatization and the Australian Political Public Sphere

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Introduction: Developing a 'Media Map' of the Australian Political Public Sphere

The relationship of media to citizenship, politics and governance in democratic societies is one that has been widely analyzed.[1] Political philosophers and reformers such as John Locke, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson and J. S. Mill, all critically reflected on the status of media to political discourse, and in the twentieth century Walter Lippmann, John Dewey, Robert Dahl and Jürgen Habermas, among many others, have 'allocated the press and public media a central role in democracy … [and] the normative "ideal" media and public communication functions' (Davis 2010: 7). Brian McNair (2011: 18–20) has observed that the minimal functions of the media in liberal democracies are that it:

- *informs* citizens of what is occurring in their society and in the world;
- *educates* citizens as to the meaning and significance of facts and events;
- provides a *platform* for competing and dissenting opinions, so that an informed public opinion can emerge;
- gives *publicity* to the actions of governments and political institutions, including critical scrutiny (the 'watchdog' function);
- serves as a channel for the *advocacy* of competing political viewpoints.

Underlying such observations are a range of questions about the actual performance of various media in relation to citizenship and the democratic process. It also raises

issues about which media are being considered in such discussions, since clearly not all media are intended to perform primarily political roles. The most influential normative benchmark that has been adopted for evaluating the performance of different media is that of the *public sphere*.

As developed by Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere has been defined as 'a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed [and] access is guaranteed to all citizens' (Habermas, 1974: 49). For Habermas, 'citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest' (Habermas 1974: 49). The media constitute one of a number of institutional spaces through which 'private persons could agree about matters of public importance, not simply out of deference to traditional authority, but through the give and take of reasoned discourse' (Johnson 2012: 20), with news journalism facilitat[ing] the consciousness of a novel public made up of private persons able to inform themselves about matters of importance and able to air and share their concerns with distant others' (Johnson 2012: 21).

Habermas' public sphere concept has for half a century provided a key framework for analyzing the content, style and democratic functionality of political media. But one of the challenges of public sphere theories is identifying the relationship between the formal institutions of the public sphere – governments, parliaments, courts, state agencies, political parties etc. – and the informal institutions, networks and practices that enable and sustain (or possibly undermine) its ongoing development. Among the questions that have been raised in media and communications studies include:

- The relationship between 'elite' and 'popular' media, and questions of the perceived quality of different media and their contribution to political discourse (Turner 1999, 2005; Nolan 2008);
- The relationship between commercial and public service media, and whether the latter have a privileged role in representing the 'public sphere' to the wider citizenry (Garnham 1990; Lowe 2009; Hendy 2013);
- Assessing the contribution of non-news program genres to the political process, including infotainment, satirical media, and so-called 'soft news' formats (McKee, 2005; van Zoonen, 2005; Gray *et. al.*, 2009; Baym 2010;);
- Identifying the contribution of the Internet to the media/politics relationship, and determining whether new practices such as blogging, citizen journalism etc., as well as the opening up of all media to more interactivity and citizen engagement through online discussion forums and social media, have opened up channels of political communication to greater citizen engagement and a more diverse range of contributing voices (Benkler 2006; Bruns *et. al.* 2011; Curran *et. al.* 2012).

In more general terms, there is the issue of whether to think about political media, or the media of the *political public sphere*, as being distinct from other media, or as part of a continuum with other media. Public sphere theories have often sought to define the institutions and practices of public sphere media as being distinct from, and in opposition to, other media forms: information as compared to entertainment; quality rather than popular; public service versus commercial media; 'hard' news rather than 'soft news or 'infotainment'; professional journalism as compared to blogging; and so

on. From a media and cultural studies perspective, John Hartley (1996) argued that the public sphere, or the mediated space of formal politics, is only one element of a broader *mediasphere*, which is in turn shaped by the broader 'semiosphere', or the world as understood through the cultural forms by which it is represented. In Hartley's account, there is 'a two-way, mutually determining relationship between politics and journalism', but this extends not only to political or 'hard news' journalism, but to 'journalism as a whole [that] even in its least political components' contributes to 'how political questions are acted out and realized socially' (Hartley 1996: 79). In the context of the mediatization of politics, to be discussed below, such work draws attention to the blurred lines between media formats and genres that exist when we attempt to map the political public sphere.

The 'Mediatization of Politics' Debate

One of the most influential concepts in both media studies and political communications over the last 10-15 years, and one that provides insights into the case studies of *Q&A* and *Gruen Nation* undertaken in this paper, has been that of the *mediatization of politics* (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Stromback 2008). Identified as part of a wider mediatization of culture and society (Lundby 2009; Couldry 2012; Couldry and Hepp 2013; Hepp 2013; Hjarvard 2013), the thesis proposes that the changing structural relations between media and politics has developed to a point where political institutions, leaders and practices are now increasingly dependent upon media and conform to the logics of media production, distribution and reception. Hjarvard (2013: 61-62) defines this as a 'double-sided development' whereby 'the media become integrated into the daily practices of political organizations and serve

both internal and external communication tasks for political actors', such as the setting of political agendas and the generation of public consent for political decisions and actions'. In seeking to gain political influence through the media, political actors 'have to take into consideration such factors as the news values of journalism, generic conventions of expression, and the typical forms of relationship that the various media constitute vis-à-vis their audiences and users' (Hjarvard 2013: 62).

It is important to distinguish mediatization from mediation. *Mediation* refers to 'the process of communication in general … [and] how communication has to be understood as involving the ongoing mediation of meaning construction' (Couldry and Hepp 2013: 197). But whereas mediation refers to technologically mediated communication in general, *mediatization* refers more specifically to processes through which politics 'has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media' (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999: 248). In relation to political communication, it marks the difference between what Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) referred to as the 'second age' of political communication, marked out by the rise of broadcast television as the primary medium through which political information was circulated, to the 'third age' of political communication, where the public sphere itself is increasingly constructed in and through the media. In this third age of political communication 'the major parties have thoroughly absorbed what may be termed the imperatives of the professionalization of political publicity … [and] attending to communication through the media is not just an add-on to political decisions but is an integral part of the interrelated processes of campaigning, cultivation of public opinion, policy-making, and government itself' (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999: 214).

Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) identified five indicators of a growing mediatization of politics:

1. The growing influence of news values, or the decision-making processes within media institutions whereby certain events are deemed to be 'newsworthy'. This is an influence not only over how politics is received by audiences, but over the conduct of political actors themselves;
2. The degree to which the political agenda, or the shaping of what issues are deemed to be relevant and important, is shaped by media institutions, with political institutions becoming increasingly responsive to the media agenda;
3. Growing recognition on the part of political actors that they compete not only with other political actors, but also with the other priorities of media institutions, in order to get attention in the media.
4. Political communication thus becomes an activity undertaken by external experts through the 'professionalization of political advocacy' (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999: 213). It is increasingly driven by market research techniques akin to those used by commercial businesses, and political institutions increasingly approach their dealings with media in an instrumental manner with the in order to advance their own aims;
5. How politics comes to be reported by journalists and news outlets is increasingly shaped by commercial calculations. While there is a long history of politically partisan media, this dimension differs in that there are more explicit calculations of the commercial implications of certain ways of communicating politics (e.g. appealing to commercially lucrative target

demographics), as distinct from simply being a mouthpiece of owner or political party interests.

While the mediatization of politics thesis tends to be associated with particular leaders, such as Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and Silvio Berlusconi, the mediatization of politics is facilitated by wider trends in society and culture, the media, and politics, including:

- an increasingly competitive media environment;
- the challenge of the Internet to traditional mass media and the 'gatekeeper' function of journalists;
- sections of the citizenry becoming increasingly educated and engaged with civic participation, while other sections increasingly withdraw from public engagement;
- a decline in class-based and other forms of 'ritual' identification with particular political parties;
- the crisis of membership of political parties; and
- the growing financial costs of political participation continuing to rise in terms of campaign resources and access to media.

The case of Tony Blair in the U.K. is often taken to be paradigmatic (Langer 2010). The transformation of the U.K. Labour Party under his leadership into the more electorally successful 'New Labour' format was linked to the role played by high-profile media managers, such as his Director of Communications and Strategy, Alastair Campbell, and his predecessor in that role, Peter Mandelson. In the

Australian context, Kevin Rudd was identified as a celebrity Prime Minister highly prone to base public policy upon media opportunities, who developed a highly personalized political style, as seen with his posting of 'selfies' onto social media sites such as Twitter (Wilson 2011). In the case of both Blair and Rudd, their media management and manipulation of public opinion generated satirical responses through comedy programs such as *The Thick Of It* on the BBC (2005-2012), and ABC's *The Hollow Men* (2008).

The mediatization of politics literature and that on the public sphere have to some degree developed in isolation from one another. This is in spite of the observation that the mediatization of politics, and of society and culture more generally, is only possible in contexts where the media institutions are understood to have their own autonomous logics, rather than being largely reflective of power relations constructed in other domains, such as politics or economics. Strömback and Esser (2014: 21) use the term *self-mediatization* to interpret the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon whereby 'political actors have internalized and adapted to the media's attention rules, production routines and selection criteria – that is, news media logic – and try to exploit the knowledge to reach different strategic goals'. In so doing, 'politicians may then win the daily battles with the news media, by getting into the news as they wish, but end up losing the war, as standards of newsworthiness begin to become prime criteria to evaluate issues, policies, and politics' (Cook 2005: 163). Jay Blumler has observed that such a 'mediatization of the public sphere' – which is broader than the mediatization of politics – may ultimately be damaging to the Habermasian conception of the public sphere since:

> The empirical observation that politicians have adapted their game to fit in with the logic of the media raises the question of whether unaccountable media institutions should determine the roles of accountable politicians (Blumler 2014: 37).

There is also the question of whether the rise of the Internet as an alternative mode of political communication undercuts earlier arguments based primarily upon the experience of broadcast media, by enabling greater horizontal communication and small-group interaction rather than being a top-down, one-to-many communications medium (Strömback 2008; Bruns *et. al.* 2011; Dahlgren 2013). Marcinkowski (2014: 8) has referred to this as the proposition that 'the news logic of traditional mass media, which is at the core of the mediatisation concept, faces a massive loss of importance and impact in the digital age', as communications channels become more decentralized and interactive. Marcinkowski advises caution with regard to over-claiming about the transformative impact of the Internet and social media on political communication, noting that media usage rates for traditional print and broadcast media remain high and that the relationship of Internet use to these is often complementary to these platforms (e.g. Twitter commentary during television programs, the comments sections of online news publications), and that both traditional media and established political organizations have been adapting their practices to the digital environment, rather than being overtaken by it.

To the extent that the mediatization of politics has been a reality of recent years, it has also generated a backlash among those involved in the political process. In his farewell speech as Prime Minister of Great Britain, Tony Blair (2007) referred to the

rise of a 'pack mentality' among media outlets, arguing that more competition for audiences among media outlets, combined with the 24/7 news cycle, had accentuated public cynicism towards governments and the political process. Given that Blair had been so strongly associated with using the media to his own political ends, he seems an odd critic of the contemporary mediatization of politics but his arguments have wider echoes among those engaged with the political process. In the Australian context the former Labor Finance Minister, Lindsay Tanner, developed an extended critique of the media/politics relationship in his book *Sideshow* (Tanner 2011). Tanner argued that there was a 'dumbing down of democracy' occurring in Australia, as:

> Under siege from commercial pressures and technological innovation, the media are retreating into an entertainment frame that has little tolerance for complex social and economic issues. In turn, politicians and parties are adapting their behavior to suit the new rules of the game—to such an extent that the contest of ideas is being supplanted by the contest for laughs. While its outward forms remain in place, the quality of our democracy is being undermined from within. One of its critical components, a free and fearless media, is turning into a carnival sideshow (Tanner 2011: 1).

The Changing Australian Political Public Sphere

Over the course of 2013 we have undertaken a mapping of the Australian political sphere, accounting for which institutional actors and individual talents are most active

in representing Australian politics and democracy. In the research we are undertaking into the political public sphere in Australia, it is apparent that a focus on those elements of the media associated with politics in a formal-institutional sense would only capture a subset of what is a much wider range of media. As a result, the study is concerned with comedy and infotainment formats as well as more conventional news and current affairs, and with the interaction not only between traditional media forms, but with these forms and social media, as seen with TV formats promoting opinion and participation through Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms. The study has been developed across multiple media platforms, and takes into account qualitative measures such as broadcast hours, press titles, column space, audience reach and ratings, circulation figures, and online analytics. The media map provides a contemporary snapshot of Australia's political public sphere, while also providing data for historical comparison.[2]

In this paper, we focus upon that map as it pertains to broadcast television. If we take the case of Australian television, programs other than formal news broadcasts that engage with news and current affairs are relatively small, and are mostly to be found on the ABC public service broadcaster (see Table 1). If we were to take out the various breakfast programs (*Sunrise*, *Today*, *ABC News Breakfast*, *Wake Up*), which are effectively news/infotainment hybrid programs (Wilson, 2011; Harrington, 2013), then there are eight significant news and current affairs programs that deal with political news, of which four are on the ABC (*7.30 Report*, *Capitol Hill*, *Four Corners*, *Lateline*). Of the other programs, *Dateline* (SBS) primarily deals with international stories, while *60 Minutes* (Nine) and *Sunday Night* (Seven) deal for the most part with stories other than those associated with Australian politics.

Figure 1 illustrates the extent to which the availability of programs and the number of broadcasting hours devoted to political news and current affairs in Australia has declined over the past twenty years. Identifying the number of hours devoted to political news and current affairs on the free-to-air (broadcast) television networks, we see a significant decline in coverage on the two highest rating commercial free-to-air broadcaster (Seven, Nine), an increase on the third commercial broadcaster (Ten), and a slight increase on the second public broadcaster (SBS). The greatest movement shows a 530% increase from a low of 530 broadcast hours in 1998 to 2650 broadcast hours in 2013 for the main public broadcaster, the ABC. The figure for the ABC accelerates sharply from 2010, with the introduction of its 24-hour news channel, ABC News 24, as multichannel broadcasting was introduced on the free-to-air networks.

Insert Figure 1

Over the last decade, there has a significant winding back of the engagement of the commercial broadcasters with Australian politics. Programs with a more specifically news and current affairs focus, such as Nine's *Sunday* and Ten's *Meet the Press* have been discontinued. The Seven and Nine networks have extended their 'newstainment' breakfast programs into the weekends, and Ten replaced *Meet the Press* by extending the time of *The Bolt Report* from 30 to 60 minutes. This program, hosted by the conservative News Limited columnist Andrew Bolt, is certainly focused on Australian politics, but is more openly politically partisan, more akin to the programs of U.S. FOX hosts such as Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity. The early evening current affairs

programs, such as *A Current Affair* on Nine and *Today Tonight* on Seven (cancelled at end-2013), no longer made any claims to be dealing with politics or even conventional news, being more focused on various scams, scandals, consumer diet information etc. (Turner 2005).

This has meant that the ABC has come to play a considerably larger role in the Australian political public sphere, as the engagement of commercial broadcasters has been wound back, and as the ABC commenced a 24-hour news channel in 2010 (see Figure 1). The other major TV service engaged with the Australian political public sphere is SKY News Australia, which is a 24-hour news channel that has been carried on the FOXTEL subscription broadcasting service since 1996. SKY News is, however, only available to Australian homes that subscribe to FOXTEL (about 30% of total Australian homes), and its audience share is estimated to be about 0.2% of the total Australian TV audience, as compared to 0.8% for ABC NEWS 24, 10.4% for ABC TV1, and 22% for Seven, which is the highest rating TV network (OzTAM 2014).

But the Australian political public sphere is considerably more diverse and vibrant if we consider the range of programs more broadly. Most obviously, we need to consider programs that are based around opinion and commentary on Australian politics. This includes the emblematic ABC program *Insiders*, the more contentious *Bolt Report* on Ten, and panel based programs such as *The Drum* (ABC), *Insight* (SBS), and a wide range of programs on the SKY News Australia channel on the FOXTEL subscription TV service. There is also the *Q&A* program on the ABC, which is panel-based and involves a live studio audience, but also incorporates social

media formats such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to enhance the real-time interactivity of the program. We can also note programs that have a public sphere remit but are targeted to particular sections of the community, such as the SBS program *Living Black* which deals with indigenous perspectives, and the long-running ABC program *Media Watch*, which engages in critical commentary on the performance of the Australian media.

Finally, we argue that an appropriate mapping of the Australian political public sphere also needs to include light entertainment, 'infotainment' and satirical comedy programs. Interestingly, these are largely to be found on the ABC, and include the series *Gruen Nation*, which critically analyses political advertising, and *Kitchen Cabinet*, where political journalist Annabel Crabb joins Australian politicians in their homes to cook and share a meal. It includes comedy programs such as *Shaun Micaleff's Mad as Hell*, *The Roast* and *The Hamster Decides*, which are all on the ABC. The latter is produced by the 'Chaser' comedy team, that has produced a number of satirical comedy programs for the ABC, including *CNNNN* and *The Chaser's War on Everything* (Harrington 2013). An interesting news/infotainment hybrid program is *The Project* (Ten), which has developed a more comedy-oriented format designed to have more appeal to younger audiences who are disengaged form more formal news and current affairs programs.

In this paper we have focused upon the forms that an extended model of the Australian political public sphere has taken in television, with particular reference to two programs: the live, panel-based program *Q&A* which incorporates elements of real-time interaction through social media into its program format, and the panel-

based program *Gruen Nation*, which critically analyses political advertising during election campaigns, building upon the program *The Gruen Transfer*, which does this in relation to advertising more generally. While these case studies are part of a larger project that deals with print, radio, and online media, we have focused on television programs in this instance as they provide distinct insights into the 'mediatization of politics' as it has been evolving in Australia. The two programs provide important contrasts to one another, as one is within the news and current affairs genre (*Q&A*) but seeks to extend the concept of a political public sphere (its tag line is 'Democracy in action') in more networked and participatory directions, while the other (*Gruen Nation*) is notionally a comedy/light entertainment program, but is one that generates considerable insight into how Australian political parties and leaders actually engage with the public as voters and citizens. Both programs are broadcast on the national public broadcaster, the ABC, which is a limitation of the study, albeit one necessitated by the relative lack of comparable programs in the Australian commercial free-to-air networks.

Case Studies: *Q &* A and *Gruen Nation*

In the remainder of this paper, we consider two Australian television programs that engage the political public sphere in original and innovative ways. Both *Q&A* and *Gruen Nation* straddle the line between a political public sphere and the mediatization of politics. *Q&A* seeks to generate a 'virtual' public sphere where live audience interaction with politicians and other invited guests is complemented by online engagement through Twitter and Facebook, with a selection of comments being screened live on the TV program: the program's tagline is 'Adventures in

Democracy'. *Gruen Nation* is about political advertising and marketing, or what its host, Wil Anderson, has termed 'the selling of politics and the politics of selling'. It does not feature current politicians, but rather a mix of ex-politicians, political commentators, and advertising executives, who critically analyze the campaign strategies of the political parties. While *Gruen Nation* is more explicitly concerned with mediated politics, we argue that it engages citizens in the political process very effectively. By contrast, while *Q&A* promises a less mediated form of political engagement, in reality it is very much framed by the strategies and logics of those political actors who commit to being involved with the program.

Engaging Citizens: *Q&A*

In the Australian political public sphere, the panel discussion program *Q&A*, on the national public broadcaster the ABC, is an important part of political discussion. *Q&A* began in 2008, and currently goes to air on Monday nights from 9:30pm, where it follows a series of current affairs programs, including *Australian Story*, the flagship current affairs program *Four Corners* and *Media Watch*. A distinctive feature of *Q&A* is that it seeks to deliver a format for political discussion in which the scrutiny of politicians is seen to be more representative than traditionally interrogative one-on-one interview, through direct public participation in live TV studio debate, which generally involves five panelists, chaired by senior journalist Tony Jones. In that respect, the format is similar to the BBC's *Question Time*, in enabling members of the public to ask questions of a panel drawn from politics and other spheres of society, such as business, news media and entertainment. Guests typically include politicians from across the spectrum of parties (including Independents), people with particular

expertise in a topical field (economists, environmentalists, etc.), journalists and opinion leaders, and internationally prominent public figures who are visiting Australia. Occasionally the format involves one-on-one debates, such as the 'Treasurers' debate' between Chris Bowen and Joe Hockey during the 2013 Federal election campaign. The program attracts at least 500,000 viewers per week, making it among the top 50 most viewed weekly programs on Australian television: its highest rating program being a debate on religion and atheism in 2012 between the writer and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins and Cardinal George Pell, the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, which attracted over 850,000 viewers.

While host Tony Jones has at times promoted the 'unscripted and unpredictable' nature of the show (Jones, 2010), the reality is that, to maintain a useful balance between open debate, political talking points and televised entertainment, the producers and editors of the program must carefully manage panelists and audiences. In promoting the appearance of political balance – and obviating accusations of bias – the program aims to ensure that the in-studio audience comprises a sample of people whose voting intentions (Labor, Liberal-National Party Coalition, Greens etc.) broadly align with those of the electorate more generally, with the percentage breakdown of the current voting intentions of the studio audience shown up on screen at the start of every edition. In this respect, *Q&A* seeks to represent the Australian polity, both literally and symbolically, where the studio becomes an *agora* where the public scrutinize politicians and public figures, question them, and hold them accountable live before the nation.

However, members of the audience set the program's agenda only in so far as the questions asked of panelists are, in the main, pre-selected from the many provided by the audience in advance of the shows broadcast (there are occasional spontaneous questions asked from the floor), with most follow-up questions coming from Jones. The range of topics from which audience questions are drawn usually form part of a discussion that – in most instances – has already been rehearsed by people who are comfortable with arguing their case or presenting their side of the debate. Thus, the role of the *Q&A* live audience rarely extends beyond the asking of questions and the provision of polite applause or muted groans as they sit passively before panelists' as they reply to questions and debate with each other on the panel. Audience members have no opportunity to answer back if they feel their own or others' questions have not been adequately addressed. The live audiences' politeness owes a deal to executive producer Peter McEvoy who each week carefully briefs audiences about appropriate TV behavior, manners and respect, telling audiences that "*Q&A* is about ideas and even passionate debate, but never about who can shout the loudest" (McEvoy 2014).

Q&A is intended to be a virtual as well as a physical agora with questions also be set to speakers via email and in video format through *YouTube* and through the incorporation of an online discussion board and, since 2010, through input from Twitter users adopting the #qanda hashtag. *Q&A* producers decided to incorporate Twitter after noticing in early 2008 the #qanda hashtag was receiving dozens of tweets during each weekly program. By the end of 2009 this had grown, in tandem with the rapid growth of Twitter use in Australia, to about 2000 tweets per week (Given and Radywyl 2013). The show now receives in excess of 21,000 tweets on

average per episode (Clune 2014). The time-sensitive nature of a live-broadcast Twitter feed means that the 80-100 tweets selected for display each week need to be broadcast within a minute of their posting on Twitter. To assist in a three-stage moderation process ABC has engaged the services of longtime ABC associate Leslie Nassar's TweeVee TV (Given and Radywyl 2013). TweeVee TV initially applies algorithmic filters to filter replies, tweets with URLs, and tweets longer than 115 characters, as well as language filters, identity filters (especially for those of known fake politician/public personality accounts). Screened tweets will then pass through an initial moderator who ensures that, like the live television audience, the Twitter audience is following the 'rules' and conventions concerning the posting of tweets that: are concise (short), timely and on topic; are witty and entertaining; add a fresh perspective to the debate; make a point without getting too personal (ABC 2013). A second moderator then selects tweets for broadcast. In addition, the moderator will automatically receive tweets that are popular within the community (Brookes 2011). In this manner, Twitter users effectively elect the most popular tweets.

The incorporation of Twitter means that program producers must effectively cater for three distinct audiences: a live studio audience (including panelists) that has no access to the Twitter feed; a television audience that is witness to behind the scenes editorial decisions (e.g. camera shots, selected Twitter feeds); and a second-screening audience that has full access to the live Twitter feed. Of these three audiences, it is the live-studio audience that is most disadvantaged as panelists and live-audience members have no engagement or conversation with the tweeters, no knowledge of which tweets are being viewed by the home audience, no tangent of the Twitter conversation, and no right of reply to the remarks, challenges or assertions made.

The 'liveness' of *Q&A*, and its combination of broadcasting and social media, mean that it can provide an important occasion for staging an action which can in turn frame public debate. On October 25, 2010, a peace activist in the studio audience, Pete Gray, threw his shoes at former Prime Minster John Howard after his response to questions about the Iraq War. By emulating the actions of the Iraqi Muntadhar al-Zaidi, who threw his shoes at U.S. President George W. Bush at a 2008 press conference in Baghdad, the activist gained worldwide news attention as the symbolism of shoe throwing in relation to the Iraq War was internationally understood. The success or otherwise of an appearance on *Q&A* can also have wider ramifications for the career of individual politicians. On the July 2, 2012 program, the Shadow Industry Minister, Sophie Mirabella, failed to respond when a panelist alongside her, Simon Sheikh, the Director of activist group GetUp!, collapsed on the panel desk. This generated considerable negative publicity for Mirabella, who was seen as being heartless towards a political critic. This was in contrast to other panel members, such as the Government minister Greg Combet, who quickly offered to help. While it is difficult to make a direct correlation, the subsequent hostile commentary on Twitter and the replaying of the incident on various satirical TV programs, consolidated a negative image for Mirabella.

In such instances, the events themselves not only become major national news stories but, with the uploading of videos onto sites such as *Upworthy*, are circulated and discussed worldwide. They also generate a positive 'buzz' around politicians who are seen to perform well within the *Q&A* format, while adverse appearances can affect a candidate's popularity with voters. Panelists who are seen as doing well on *Q&A* are

those that engage with and perform according to the spirit of the show by choosing not to engage in spin and party politics, and to instead speak as independently minded public figures interpreting politics and current events as informed individuals, and providing honest answers without being obfuscating.

Q&A also provides a forum for the staging of ethical conflict in the public sphere. On September 3, 2013 *Q&A* program, broadcast during the Federal election campaign, the Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a particularly forthright response to a Brisbane Pastor's question concerning why he had changed his views on same-sex marriage. Arguing that literal interpretations of the Bible could lead to condoning slavery, Rudd's response generated divided commentary, particularly as Rudd had previously presented himself as a devout Christian, whose electoral success in 2007 was due in part to his ability to win over Christian voters who had not been well disposed towards the Australian Labor Party (Smith 2009).

Q&A can be understood as attempting to replicate a modern Australian public sphere, albeit one that is both mediated by broadcasting and by digital technologies. At the same time, it has developed innovations that suggest going beyond the traditional limitations of the top-down political public sphere, such as the use of Twitter and YouTube videos to enable interactivity, participation and something more akin to a networked public sphere than the traditional panel discussion show format (Bruns *et. al.* 2011). The inclusion of social media in *Q&A* could have provided opportunities for a more diverse array of viewpoints and provided innovative ways of communicating with politicians and of organizing debate and discussion, such as the crowdsourcing of questions or the ranking of panelists' answers. However the

program-makers have integrated broadcast and online content only in the service of animating the television program, offering editorially selected YouTube questions and fragments of online tweets via the one-way, single channel authority of a live broadcast television program: seemingly increasing public engagement with politics through entertainment as 'a fun way to participate in a live political discussion' (ABC, 2013).

Q&A represents the Australian political public sphere in quite paradoxical ways. At one level, it is an alternative to 'mediated politics', as it is built upon the direct engagement of politicians and other panel participants with the citizenry, whether among those in the studio audience or those participating through social media. It provides a forum for agonistic public debate, where ordinary citizens are given the opportunity to voice their concerns directly to their elected representatives, and where the expectation of conflict and disagreement among panel members is built into the program format. At the same time, the interaction is itself highly mediated. Questions that are asked of the politicians go through a multi-stage screening process, and there is a vetting of the studio audience on the basis of voting intentions. Observations of its production also suggest that the producers go to great lengths to ensure that the questions coming from the audience are well rehearsed, and worded exactly as approved by producers, suggesting that the politicians are aware of, and thus able to prepare for, the questions that will be put to them. While it aims to replicate a networked public sphere for a transmedia age, there is nonetheless a strong degree to which *Q&A* furthers the mediatization of politics.

Persuading and Entertaining Citizens: *Gruen Nation*

An important element of the Australian political public sphere in the 2010s has been the television program *Gruen Nation*. Produced by CJZ and broadcast on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), it is a panel program that has run for four episodes during the 2010 and 2013 Australian Federal elections that critically analyses political campaign advertising. The program is a spin-off of *The Gruen Transfer*, which has been broadcast on the ABC since 2008, and looks at advertising in general. During the 2010 Federal election, *Gruen Nation* attracted about 1.5 million viewers and topped its rating timeslot, while the 2013 programs attracted over 1.2 million viewers. This makes it one of the most watched programs dealing with Australian politics during both campaigns. [3]

The format of *Gruen Nation* is that the host Wil Andersen, a well-known Australian comedian, has a mix of advertising industry figures, political analysts and ex-politicians and political advisers as his regular guests, appearing before a live studio audience. At the core of the program format are two regular guests from *The Gruen Transfer*: Russel Howcroft, the national CEO of the George Patterson Y&R advertising agency, and Todd Sampson, national CEO of the Australian division of international agency Leo Burnett.[4] Although both have similar occupational roles, they are positioned quite differently in the program: Howcroft as the 'conservative' on the panel, and Sampson as a more politically radical 'creative' type. The two distinctive archetypes are used as the basis for the two panelists to stage disagreements about program content.

On *Gruen Nation* in 2013, they were joined by ABC political commentator and program presenter Annabel Crabb, Lachlan Harris, who had previously worked as media advisor to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, with the fourth panel position shared between John Hewson, who was Liberal Party leader from 1990-1994, ABC radio presenter and former Liberal Senator for South Australia (1984-2007) Amanda Vanstone, and veteran Liberal campaigner Toby Ralph.

An important element of the show is that, while Labor and Liberal aligned panel members are sought to ensure the appearance of program balance, they are nonetheless openly critical of the campaigning strategies used by the political parties with which they are associated. Anderson has described the purpose of the program as being that 'if the ABC is the national broadcaster, then *Gruen Nation* is the national bullshit detector' (ABC 2010). It is therefore important that all presenters are skeptical of the parties themselves, and that they do not simply repeat their campaigning messages. The program is also not intended to be a platform from which to comment on the policies of the respective parties, but rather on their use of advertising to communicate messages to the public, or what Anderson terms 'the politics of selling and the selling of politics' (*Gruen Nation*, 14 August 2013). As Anderson also observed in the series:

> The Federal election is like a big stocktake sale … You won't hear any policy talk here. We are only interested in how the big brands … try and get us to buy (*Gruen Nation*, 14 August 2013).

At one level, *Gruen Nation* provides the forms of meta-commentary on advertising and political communication that is familiar to communications and media studies since the pioneering works of Roland Barthes and Judith Williamson (Barthes 1977; Williamson 1978). At the same time, these are also insiders' accounts of the techniques used to manipulate audiences that are being discussed approvingly rather than critically. In Episode Four (screened 4 September 2013), there was discussion of a Labor Party 'attack ad' where various people (mothers with children, male workers, school children, people in wheelchairs) are placed in various 'spotlights' against a black background, before it focuses on a single 'spotlight' of a boy who – according to the ad – will lose his school bag, hat and school uniform if the policies of the Liberal-National Party Coalition are adopted. The ensuing discussion notes that the 'spotlight' is a familiar feature of negative political advertising, as it suggests that the viewer may be another of the 'ordinary people' threatened by the other side's policies should they be elected. But the panelists do not condemn the use of the spotlight as manipulative or deceptive, nor do they question whether this is a realistic representation of the Coalition's policies. Their purpose is to discuss whether or not this particular use of the 'spotlight' technique will have the sought-after effect of causing undecided voters to support the Labor Party.

In Episode Four, the panelists also discussed the necessity of political leaders appearing on various comedy and 'soft news' programs, as well as FM radio programs. Observing that these programs tend to have a younger demographic, as well as a larger number of undecided voters, it is emphasized that politicians need to appear 'real' and unscripted in their responses to a very unpredictable range of questions: the biggest turn-off for these audiences is for politicians to appear

excessively 'on message' and thereby not come across as being 'authentic' (Langer 2010). Lachlan Harris notes that this is a challenge, since 'Prime Ministers are very busy people. They do not have time to keep up with popular culture' (*Gruen Nation*, 4 September 2013). At the same time, they have to have answers to questions such as who is their favorite band, and Harris recalls that in 2007 Kevin Rudd said his favorite band was the Brisbane band Powderfinger, so part of Harris's job as a media advisor was to keep Rudd appraised about whether Powderfinger had any new albums out or were touring, in case he was asked on FM radio or on a TV program. Rather than this being seen as manipulative or as devaluing politics or public office, it is clearly seen on *Gruen Nation* as being as natural a part of contemporary politics as being briefed on foreign policy or developing a budget. As Howcroft concluded in relation to Australian politics and popular culture, 'If you're the Prime Minister or the Leader of the Opposition, it's a media job' (*Gruen Nation*, 4 September 2013).

Conclusion: Engagement and Entertainment in the Australian Political Public Sphere

One way of thinking about the two ABC program under consideration is that *Q&A* represents the public sphere proper, and *Gruen Nation* is emblematic of the mediatization of politics. *Gruen Nation* offers an unabashed account of 'the politics of selling and the selling of politics', where advertising executives sit alongside political pundits evaluating the tactics of persuasion used by Australia's major and minor political parties. It can be said to address the citizen as consumer, albeit a sophisticated, self-aware media consumer who can step back from the relatively

unsophisticated tactics of political communication on display with political leaders looking out of airplane windows, angry mothers chopping vegetables while questioning the real intention of these leaders, and children placed in spotlights where losing their school uniform allowance is possibly a precursor of a fate that will be far worse. A clear line is drawn in *Gruen Nation* between debate about the advertising strategies used to sell particular political leaders and policies and the policies themselves, which are off limits for panel discussion. In terms of the program's placement on the ABC, it points to the irony of a program devoted to the discussion of effectiveness in advertising being located on the national public broadcaster, prohibited on the basis of its Charter from carrying commercial advertising. Significantly, it is broadcast on Wednesday nights, which is earmarked by the ABC as being for comedy and satire, with programs such as *The Hamster Wheel*, *Mad as Hell* and *At Home With Julia* broadcasting on this night.

By contrast, *Q&A* is a flagship program in the news and current affairs division of the national public broadcaster, and the program understands itself as enabling 'democracy in action' for Australian citizens. The program format replicates in a number of respects an 'ideal' public sphere, with apparently direct and unmediated interaction between audience members and politicians, and interaction and participation in debates surrounding the program through social media. Yet *Q&A* also presents mediated politics: the studio audience is intended to be balanced in terms of allegiance to the major political parties, questions to panel members are checked prior to broadcast, and the Tweets that appear on screen are carefully curated by ABC staff. Politicians clearly view *Q&A* as another means of reaching the Australian public

through the media, albeit by presenting a 'self' that appears to engage more 'authentically' with the assembled studio audience.

Both *Q&A* and *Gruen Nation* can be seen as part of the mediatization of Australian politics, albeit with different relationships to the process. *Gruen Nation* is premised on the idea that contemporary politics is thoroughly mediatized, to the degree that it is taken as a given that political parties market themselves as brands and products, and that the advertising industry are the most appropriate adjudicators of the success of their campaigns. It is premised on the idea that politics needs to entertain if it is to engage, and could be seen as promoting the consumerist focus of political communication and what Lindsay Tanner termed the 'Sideshow' dimensions of the contemporary media/politics relationship. At the same time, it avoids the 'hyper-adversarialism' that concerned Tony Blair in his 2007 Reuters speech: one consequence of viewing politics as selling, rather than as competition over alternative policy visions, is that all parties are essentially seen as participants in the market for votes, and where there is no inherent moral superiority. *Gruen Nation* represents an Australian political public sphere were, as Mazzoleni and Schulz hypothesized, 'the language of politics has been married with that of advertising, public relations, and show business' (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999: 251).

The case of *Q&A* is more complex, as it has been developed in part to address criticisms of the media/politics relationship, by requiring politicians to directly engage with members of the public without mediation or spin, while offering them the opportunity to get messages across to the public that are not filtered through the questions asked by political journalists. Moreover, it updates the panel discussion or

'Town Hall Meeting' format by encouraging engagement through social media such as Twitter, and building this engagement into the live program itself. But it would be somewhat bold to claim that the program is at odds with wider trends towards mediated politics. Rather, it suggests that displays of authenticity provide another element in the ways in which 'what counts in the public sphere … are communication skills, the style of addressing the public, the "look", the image' (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999: 251), and how this represents another dimension of the professionalization of politics.

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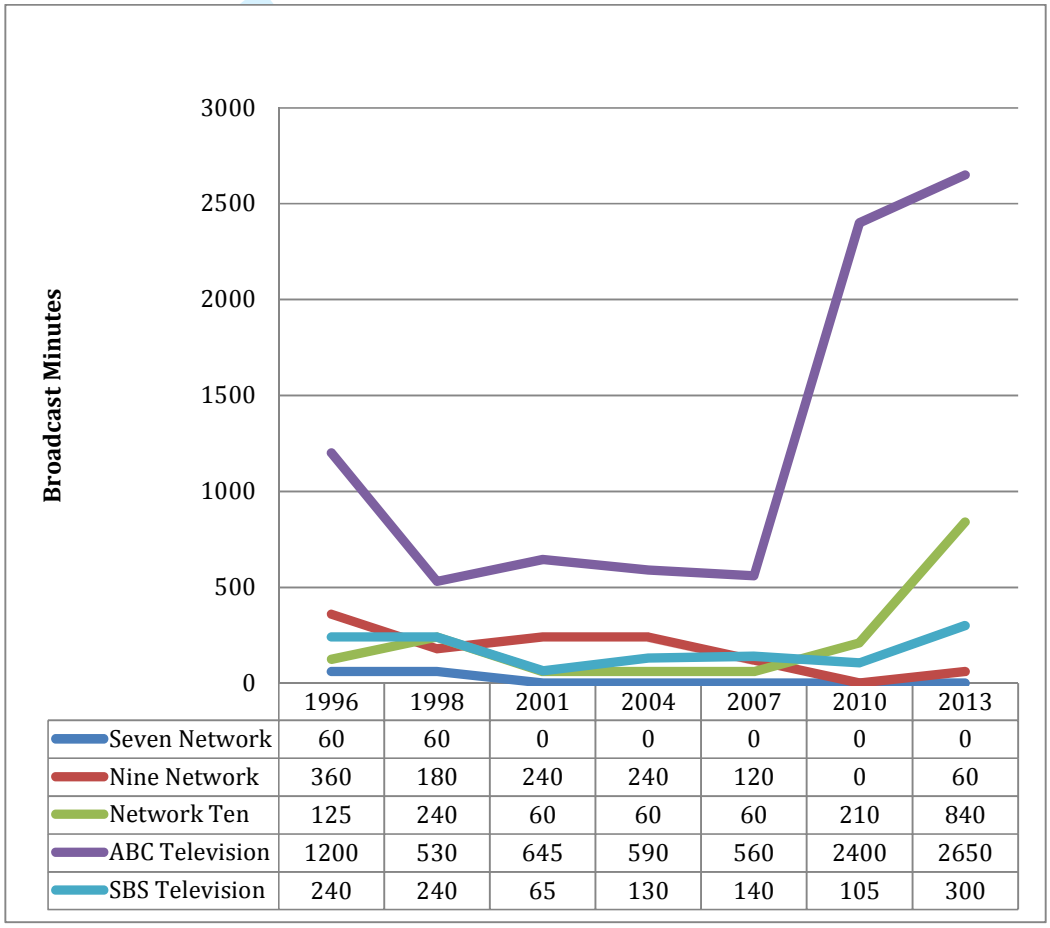
Figure 1

Political Public Sphere programs on Australian broadcast television, total for final fortnight of Federal Election (excluding Election night coverage and news bulletins)



	1996	1998	2001	2004	2007	2010	2013
Seven Network	60	60	0	0	0	0	0
Nine Network	360	180	240	240	120	0	60
Network Ten	125	240	60	60	60	210	840
ABC Television	1200	530	645	590	560	2400	2650
SBS Television	240	240	65	130	140	105	300

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[2] The full media map data will be presented in a forthcoming book, *Politics, Media and Democracy: Perceptions of the Political Sphere in Australia*, to be published by Routledge in 2105.

[3] The title of the parent program *The Gruen Transfer* refers to a phenomenon identified by the Austrian architect Victor Gruen, whereby shopping malls are designed in a deliberately confusing manner, so as to disorient the entrant sufficiently to cause them to lose track of their original shopping intention. The result is referred to as 'scripted disorientation' where consumers respond by moving in the mall more slowly in order to get better spatial awareness of their environment. They are also more likely to enter into a wider range of stores than was originally intended (Crawford 2004).

[4] Howcroft was also appointed the Executive General Manager of Network Ten in February 2013, meaning that at the time of the 2013 series he headed a commercial rival to the ABC, which screens *Gruen Nation*. This is another ironic aspect of a program that deals with advertising, but is broadcast on a national public broadcaster that is prevented by law from carrying commercial advertising.

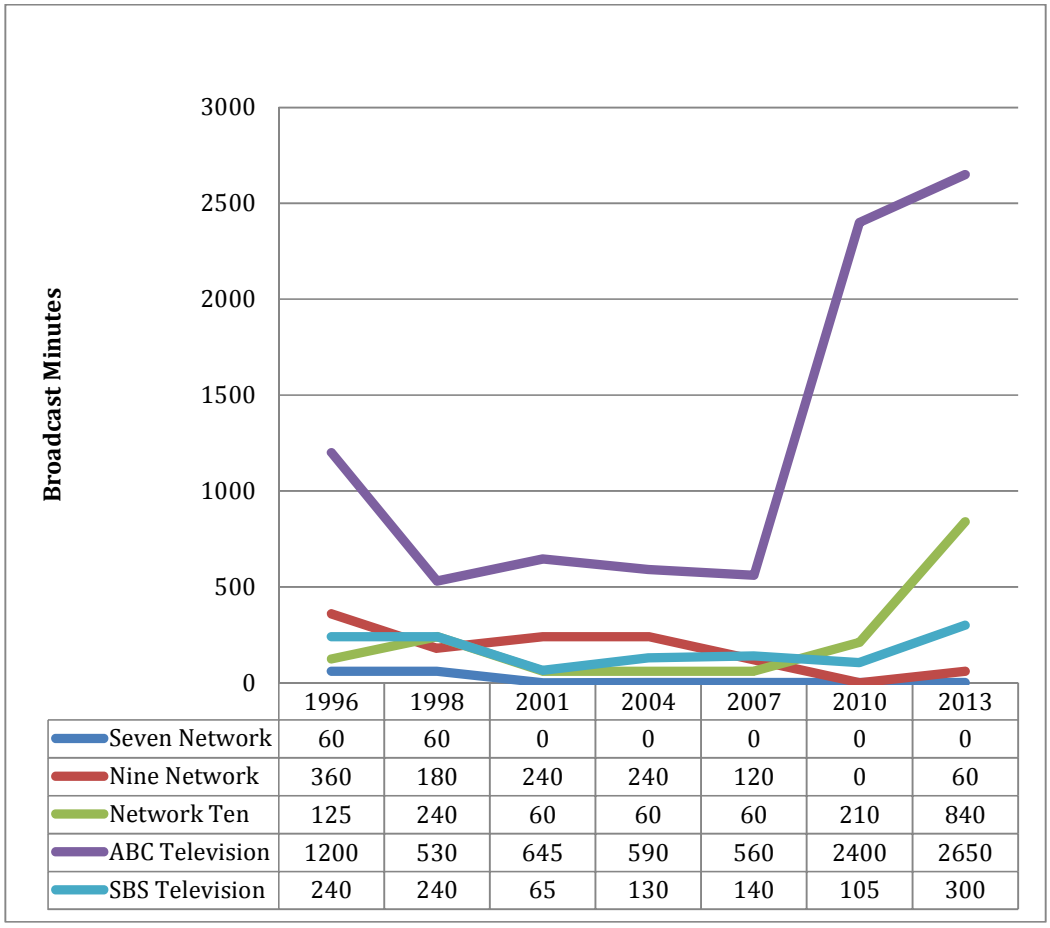
Table 1

Australian Television Programs Engaged with the Political Public Sphere, June 2014 (commercial, public broadcaster, and subscription channels)

	NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS	LIGHT ENTERTAINMENT/ INFOTAINMENT	COMEDY, SATIRE	OPINION/ DISCUSSION	PARTICIPATION/ TALKBACK	OTHER
AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION (PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCAST)	7.30 Report ABC News Breakfast Capitol Hill Four Corners Lateline	Gruen Nation Kitchen Cabinet	Mad as Hell The Roast The Hamster Decides	Insiders The Drum	Q & A	Media Watch (media analysis program)
NINE NETWORK (COMMERCIAL BROADCAST)	Today 60 Minutes					
SEVEN NETWORK (COMMERCIAL BROADCAST)	Sunrise Sunday Night					
TEN NETWORK (COMMERCIAL BROADCAST)		The Project		The Bolt Report		
SPECIAL BROADCASTING SERVICE (PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCAST)	Dateline	The Feed		Insight		Living Black (indigenous focus)
SKY NEWS AUSTRALIA (COMMERCIAL SUBSCRIPTION)	Agenda			The Contrarians The Nation with David Speers Paul Murray Live PVO News Hour Richo Richo and Jones		

Figure 1

Political Public Sphere programs on Australian broadcast television, total for final fortnight of Federal Election (excluding Election night coverage and news bulletins)



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